ELSEVIER

Not an afterthought: Authoring a text on adult ESOL

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In her article in this special issue, Catherine Wallace makes the case that the active reading of a text is tantamount to "authoring" a new text. As a reader engages with a given text, the reader is not only grappling with the content of the text, but is seeking to make sense of the text in the light of past experience, pre-existing ideas, and intertextual connections. As I read through these five articles on adult ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), I scribbled comments in the margin, underlined different sections, added questions and exclamations, drew arrows from one section to another, consulted other articles, and started writing a series of notes to myself. It is these preliminary thoughts that I wish to "author" for my Afterword for this special issue of *Linguistics and Education.* In authoring this text, I am drawing primarily on my own research with adult immigrants in Canada, with whom I have worked for the past two decades.

In the process of writing this Afterword, I sought to update myself on adult ESOL research internationally, in order to bring a comparative perspective to the British focus of the special issue. However, like Murray (2005), I found that there is no coherent body of research literature on adult ESOL education. As Murray notes, delivery systems for adult language learners in English-dominant countries, including Australia, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA differ considerably. This, in turn, leads to different perceptions of the adult ESOL learner and different research foci, the result of which is fragmentary, context-specific research, with findings that cannot be generalized to other contexts. I found, in addition, that the question of funding is a common theme in research on adult ESOL, largely as a result of adult ESOLs ambivalent status within the education systems of different countries. In most English-dominant countries, there is a central focus on elementary and secondary education, which is compulsory to mid-adolescence, with adult education receiving a fraction of per capita spending. For example, while the impressive figure of almost half a billion dollars was allocated to adult education programming in the USA in the year 2002, amounting to $374 per adult learner, this was a small percentage relative to the amount of $6835 average spent per student in the elementary and secondary education system (National Centre for ESL Literacy Education, 2002, p. 5).

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Notwithstanding this rather bleak picture internationally, there have been some developments that have led to greater focus on the adult ESOL learner, which has sought to integrate policy, research and practice in a more coherent and systematic way. For example, in both the United States and Canada, national centres have been established that have sought to provide leadership of adult ESOL provision. In the USA, the establishment of the National Centre for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE), operated by the Centre for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, DC, has taken initiative in developing a plan of action for the 21st Century (National Centre for ESL Literacy Education, 2002). The website of this organization provides extensive information on the mandate and activities of this organization. In Canada, likewise, the establishment of the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLBs) in Ottawa has provided much leadership in service delivery for adult immigrants in Canada. Further, the development of the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) has sought to promote accountability in adult ESL program delivery (Norton & Stewart, 1999).

While these North American centres have provided leadership with respect to setting priorities for policy and research, translating policy into practice has remained an ongoing challenge (National Centre for ESL Literacy Education, 2002). My review of the articles for this special issue suggests that the challenges faced by adult ESOL learners, teachers, and researchers in Britain have much in common with their counterparts in other English-dominant countries. By way of elaboration, I will respond to each article in turn, highlighting themes and issues that resonate with my own research on adult ESOL in Canada.

It is interesting to note that Celia Roberts has highlighted methodological issues in adult ESOL research, focusing on the strengths and limitations of quantitative and qualitative research, respectively. Of particular note is her argument that "large scale studies with quantitative findings are perceived as having a far greater impact on policy and the potential for change than small scale qualitative studies which are rarely funded by government departments." Roberts' comments raise a number of important issues for the adult ESOL researcher. Why have qualitative researchers had so little success in convincing policy-makers of the value and relevance of their work? More troubling, perhaps, is the extent to which researchers may in fact reframe research questions and modify methodologies in order to improve chances of securing competitive funding. Roberts cautions that top-down policy can be fraught with challenges, and may in fact be counter-productive in the classroom. In this regard, she shares the concerns expressed by the teacher, Jack, that transforming the "feminised ESOL tradition" into "tougher and more masculine" policy-driven pedagogy would be a loss to adult learners. In response to these challenges, the research team whose work is presented in this theme issue have developed an innovative and effective "mixed method" approach to research that addresses the demands of funders and policy-makers, while maintaining an ethnographic perspective.

In my own research with adult learners, I have been centrally concerned with working within a framework that could be called a "critical" approach to methodology, one that is informed by educational research in cultural studies, feminist research, and critical ethnography (Norton, 2000). While critical researchers in these areas do not always ask the same questions or share the same assumptions, the ideas they share, six of which I outline below, have been highly productive for my research with adult language learners. I have made the case that critical research has the following characteristics: (1) it aims to investigate the complex relationship between social structure on the one hand, and human agency on the other, without resorting to deterministic or reductionist analyses; (2) it assumes that an understanding of "social structure" requires attention to inequitable relations of power based on a range of discourses, including gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; (3) it is centrally concerned with the way in which individuals make sense of

their own experience, a method of analysis that returns the researcher to the actualities of what people do on a daily basis in particular situations; (4) it locates research within a historical context, in which history is not simply relegated to the collection of 'background data'; (5) it rejects the view that any research can claim to be "objective" or "unbiased"; and (6) it takes the position that the goal of educational research is social and educational change. Such critical research, while being "situated", remains committed to an ethical, rigorous, and accountable agenda.

A concern with agency and contingency, as articulated in Mike Baynham's article is highly consistent with a critical research agenda. He notes that while adult language learners are novices in the new language, they are experts in other languages, bringing to the classroom a wide range of lifeworld experiences and professional identities. It is incumbent on the teacher, they suggest, to respond contingently to the histories and experiences of these adult learners, in particular those whose experiences as refugees and asylum seekers are not only life-changing, but sometimes life-threatening. Baynham cautions, however, that "bringing the outside into the ESOL classroom" is not without its challenges. He notes that there are some learners who do not necessarily want to bring the outside world into the ESOL classroom; they take comfort in the identity of the student, "a stable point in the highly unstable lifeworld" of a refugee or asylum seeker. Baynham refers, for example, to the research of David Barton and Rachel Hodge, who found a teacher working actively with adolescent asylum seekers to "insulate the classroom from the vicissitudes of these external pressures, creating a safe space for students." This theme is echoed in the article by Melanie Cooke, who found that the classroom is "a point of stability" in the chaotic lives of many learners.

The issues that Baynham raises are ones I have struggled with in my own research with adult immigrants in Canada, in which I have sought to understand student resistance and non-participation in ESOL classrooms (Norton, 2000, 2001). In this research, I demonstrate how one adult learner dropped out of an ESOL class because the teacher did not validate her Peruvian identity, and how another dropped out of an ESOL class because the teacher did not validate her professional identity. In Baynham's terms, the respective teachers did not respond contingently to learners' investments in particular identities, past successes, and future desires. Nevertheless, Mai, another student, dropped out of an adult ESOL class precisely because she felt that when she listened to the life histories of other students, she "didn't learn at all". I analyse this data with reference to what I call the "imagined communities" of adult learners, and make the case that adult learners are frequently invested in communities of the imagination, communities that exist outside the classroom, and may have little investment in members of their existing classroom community. The challenge for the teacher, I suggest, is to encourage students to invest in members of the classroom community and to "re-imagine" the classroom community as a productive space for learning. This research supports Baynham's finding that in the process of responding contingently to an issue raised by individual learners, the teacher needs to consider the investments of other students. What is required, Baynham suggests, is innovative "teacher work" that resourcefully transforms contingent issues into pedagogical routines of interest to all learners.

Reading James Simpson's article on the complexities of conducting speaking tests for adult immigrants was an experience of déjà vu. Ever since my training in assessment at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, USA, where I worked on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), I have grappled with the issues that he raises on authenticity and accountability in language testing. One of Simpson's central findings was that learners taking speaking tests, and interlocutors administering the tests, have differing expectations of what kind of speech event a speaking test is. Is it a conversation? Is it a speaking test? This ambivalence, Simpson notes, is compounded when learners have little experience of formal schooling, and have not learnt

what Spolsky (1985) calls "the rules of the game". I have argued, drawing on my research on assessment in the USA (Norton Peirce, 1992), South Africa (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995), and Canada (Norton & Stewart, 1999) that every language test is a "genre" in the sense in which it is used by Kress (1989). Like Kress, I have argued that a "genre" is not the more conventional notion of oral or written "text type" as, for example, a sonnet, term paper, interview, or prayer. Rather, a genre is constituted within and by a particular social occasion that has a conventionalized structure, and which functions within the context of larger institutional and social processes. The important point is that the conventionalized forms of these occasions and the organization, purpose, and intention of participants within the occasion give rise to the meanings associated with the specific genre. In this regard, Kress has noted that in genres where there is great power difference between the participants, the mechanism of interaction, the conventionalized form of the genre, is most foregrounded, while the substance of the interaction, the content, is least foregrounded.

The conception of a language test as a socially constituted genre has helped me to make sense of unexpected findings from my research with different language assessment instruments, and has relevance to the issues that Simpson raises. In my research on the TOEFL reading test, for example, I found (Norton Peirce, 1992) that even when a multiple choice question had no clear answer, savvy learners adopted the identity of the "test taker" and anticipated what the test maker *intended* to ask in a given question. As Simpson has found, however, there are many learners who have not been trained in such test taking techniques. Simpson notes, for example, that there were some learners who said very little during the speaking test itself, but became "voluble and expansive" when the test itself was over. This suggests that the learners "read" the speaking test and the subsequent conversation as two different genres. In the test event, structured on unequal relations of power, it was the mechanism of interaction rather than the substance that was considered of central importance, while in the conversation after the test, where more equal relations of power prevailed, learners were able to focus on the content of the conversation. It is clear that the challenge for language testers is to make tests more user-friendly, while acknowledging that power inequities still persist. Attempts to make tests more "authentic" without taking seriously power differentials between test makers and test takers will most likely result in confusion and ambiguity.

Melanie Cooke's analysis of the challenges facing adult immigrants in Britain have much in common with those facing adult immigrants in Canada (Burnaby and Cumming, 1992; Morgan, 1998). While she worked with a corpus of interview data from 76 adults sharing 19 languages and 26 nationalities, it is the comprehensive analysis of data from four adults that gives much texture and depth to her findings. Her two central questions concern the extent to which systems currently in place in Britain, such as the Individual Learning Plan, do indeed meet the needs of adult learners, and the extent to which current pedagogical practices encourage the full potential of such learners. Similar to the findings from my own research with adult immigrants (Norton, 2000, 2001), Cooke found that although the learners were getting some of their needs met, some of the time, the trajectory of their progress was disappointingly slow. I read with despair, for example, that Dasha, a learner with strong investment in English, and valuable cultural and symbolic capital, will likely wait at least seven years after arrival before she can enter the bottom rung of her medical profession in Britain. Cooke concludes that teachers need to consider learners' lives outside the classroom, factors constraining human possibility, past experiences and trajectories, and aspirations for the future. Clearly, this represents a challenge for teachers with large classes and what Cooke aptly calls "the increasing textualization of work".

I have been challenged by teachers in different parts of the world to suggest ways in which they can take seriously the lives of adult learners, while responding to the demands of large classes, top-

down curricula, and frequently unrealistic policy expectations. While I appreciate that that there are no easy answers to this challenge, what I have sought to do in my own Canadian classrooms, drawing on both research and theory, is to explore with learners a range of identity options they can adopt in their relationship with English-speaking Canadians. Many feel that the identity "immigrant" or "language learner" is not a valued identity in Canada, and are uncomfortable speaking from this position. As one adult learner said, "I'm not an immigrant in Canada, just a foreigner person who lives here by accident." I have therefore suggested that they adopt the identity of "ethnographer" in their attempts to interact with native speakers, recording both successful and unsuccessful interactions, and observing Canadian cultural practices from a position of strength rather than weakness. They are also invited to share their experiences with others in the class, so that they can learn from one another, and explore multiple ways in which they can engage more meaningfully with the wider community. I am excited by Catherine Wallace's suggestion that teachers, too, should undertake mini ethnographies "to be able to stand back from their own classrooms – to 'read' their classrooms" in order to become more effective language teachers.

Catherine Wallace's research suggests, in addition, that it is not only oral texts that constitute a challenge for adult language learners. In exploring the role of text in ESOL literacy learning, Wallace makes the case that many adult ESOL texts in Britain remain "unyielding", textbooks "attractively packaged but nutritionally poor", and worksheets "monologic". What is required of the learner is that they simply respond with "correct" answers to classroom texts. Wallace argues, therefore, for an expansion of the textual repertoires in the ESOL classroom, one that conceives of the text as a social artifact by means of which learners grow increasingly engaged with a wider range of texts, socially mediated within and outside classrooms. Further, she makes the case that teachers should strive to encourage "textual authoring", which validates not only the grammatical and content knowledge derived from text, but also the histories and understandings that learners bring to text. Such textual authoring requires that the adult educator conceive of the learner as creative, critical, and imaginative, rather than an essentialized language learner, who in Wallace's terms, is often subject to "infantilisation". As one of my adult research participants in Canada told me, "I want to take computer course, not because I have to speak, but because I have to think."

The notion of text as social artifact resonates with the work of Dyson (1996), who has been influential in helping me to make sense of my recent research on text and ESOL learners. While this research has focused on young learners (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004), my findings provide a backward glance at the initial stages of reading, in which students learn at a very young age what constitutes a "good reader" and a "good text". As Dyson (1996, p. 492) notes, "Curricula must also be undergirded by a belief that meaning is found, not in artifacts themselves, but in the social events through which those artifacts are produced and used". Dyson's conception of the relationship between social events and the text as artifact has been central in helping me to understand the appeal of comics for young English language learners in Canada. What I found was that it was the trading, swapping, and sharing of comics, in other words, the social events through which they were used, that was crucial to their appeal. Reading of comics was undertaken in communities in which distinctions between native and non-native speakers of English diminished, in which readers took ownership of the construction of meaning (what Wallace might consider an innovative "authoring of the text"), and in which learners did not seek to second-guess their teacher's "correct" reading of the text. The multimodal features of these texts, which include pictures and dialogues, were also highly effective in promoting learning. Nevertheless, despite learners' active engagement with these texts, they ruefully declared that their teachers and parents dismissed the comics as "trash" and their reading a "waste of time".

Wallace's research, and that of Roberts, Baynham, Simpson, and Cooke speaks with compassion, insight, and rigour to the challenges facing adult ESOL learners, teachers, and researchers in Britain. Not only do their findings resonate with other adult ESOL research internationally, but they have made an important contribution to theory building in adult ESOL. Issues of agency and contingency, of fast grammar and text authoring, of knowledge schema and frame are highly useful for other ESOL teachers and researchers. However, one issue that remains a major challenge, not only for these researchers, but for all second language research communities, concerns the investments of the target language community. While adult ESOL language learners may strive to make a productive contribution to their new societies, unless the host community is receptive to their arrival, they will struggle to fulfill their potential. Indeed, what is required in many English-dominant communities is a fundamental shift of our investments in particular local, national, and global identities. This special issue will be an invaluable resource in the process of re-imagination.

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